

Sexuality and the Griffith Woman:
The Victorian Ideal in Way Down East (1920)
with an Introduction on the Use of Film as a Historical Document

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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May 1993

May 8, 1993

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, reformers struggled to define women's sexuality. Progressive reformers advocated a combination of sexual freedom and the old ideals of marriage, while the more conservative reformers continued to espouse the Victorian ideal. This struggle was not new, but it found a new arena - the motion picture. By reaching a vast audience, particularly the middle class, motion pictures had the potential of influencing a vast number of social issues including women's sexuality.

By the end of World War I, director D.W. Griffith had emerged within the film industry as a champion of the Victorian ideal. However, Griffith's 1920 film Way Down East represents more than just this ideal. The film also portrays the new female sexual ideology that is developing through the efforts of the progressive reformers. This paper focuses on a number of the images of women's sexuality in Way Down East and draws upon the D.W. Griffith papers found at the Museum of Modern Art, contemporary newspaper articles, and scholarly works. Also included is an introduction on how teachers may use films as a historical document.

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Preface

Fall semester of my junior year marked a new beginning in the way I viewed history. In that semester, I took a course on studying American history through film. I had always enjoyed movies, especially historical ones, but I had never thought of films as historical documents. By the time the course finished, I was definitely interested in continuing to study films and history. The following summer, my professor suggested I write a conference paper on a film I had previously analyzed in class. Not knowing any better, I said yes and began on a trail of documents and research that eventually led to my honors thesis and a trip to New Orleans.

The film I have analyzed is Way Down East, a 1920 D.W. Griffith film. For the course I examined the country-urban dichotomy. At the suggestion of my professors, I expanded a portion of my original paper dealing with the images of women and began to study women's sexuality and the Victorian ideal as portrayed in the film. I first thought that Griffith had created a film emulating the Victorian ideal and the piousness and purity of motherhood. However, after focusing my research on new writings concerning sexuality, I found the film did not accurately portray the Victorian ideal although it did include many aspects of the ideal.

In October 1992 I presented an early version of the paper titled "Griffith and the Victorian Ideal: Women's Sexuality in Way Down East (1920)" at the regional conference for the Midwest Popular Culture Association in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was fortunate to receive some excellent remarks from the panel commentator. I then revised my paper using these remarks and some additional research. My final version titled "Sexuality and the Griffith Woman: The Victorian Ideal in Way Down East (1920)" was presented at the National Popular Culture Conference held in New Orleans, Louisiana in April 1993. The paper appears here as it was presented in New Orleans.

The trip to New Orleans would not have been possible without financial assistance. Ball State's chapter of the Golden Key National Honor Society, the History Department, the Honors College, and the Provost all graciously donated money to defray costs. I would also like to thank Arno Wittig, Anthony and Joanne Edmonds, Nina Mjagikj (the notes from her film class were an great help in the introduction), Marcy May, and my thesis advisor, Ray White for their support and guidance. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Shane Murray for his continuing support in this and all of my endeavors.

R.A.P.

May 1993

We believe that motion pictures speak the universal language. I mean that American newspapers and stories are written in the English language only appeal to the English speaking and reading people, but pictures, needing no translation, are a universal language.

D.W. Griffith in a 1925 radio address

Introduction:
The Uses of Film as a Historical Document

Teachers have long used films that recreate historical events such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They have also used films to stimulate discussion about issues such as poverty. With video usage increasing rapidly in schools across the United States, teachers must look for new techniques to differentiate the use of video and film in the classroom from the also increasing usage of television and video in the home. One technique is to teach students to use film as a primary historical document since films are reflections of the time period in which they are made. They reflect the attitudes as well as pictorial representations of life in a particular time period.

The making of a film is a group project in which nothing happens by accident. All people involved in making the film including the writers, the actors, the directors, the camera man, et cetera, have added their own personal interpretations try to influence the audience to think in a certain way. For example, in the early 1900s D.W. Griffith as a champion of the Victorian ideal portrayed unfavorably any aspect that goes against the ideal. Another more recent example is Oliver Stone's JFK (1992). In this film he tries to prove John Kennedy's assassination was a conspiracy.

However, if all of these people are adding their own interpretations to the film, how can it be a reflection of the time period? First and foremost,

filmmakers main objective is to make a profit. Thus, they must make movies that reflect the demands of the popular culture of the time period. Also, these people do not live in a vacuum. They are members of the society, and they may have attitudes and biases similar to those of their audience. Even if a film appears to be nothing like the time period, prevailing notions are still often reflected. An excellent example of this is The Wizard of Oz (1939). Although most of the film is set in the fantasy land of Oz, it reflects the perceived period of isolationism in the United States during the 1930s through such aspects as Dorothea's "There is no place like home."

Since many students do not understand how to use films as historical documents, teachers who use them in their classrooms are often accused of letting the films do the teaching for them. If teachers want to effectively use films, they must demonstrate how to critically analyze them. The students need to know some basic information about films and must receive some guidance as they begin to analyze the films.

One of the first aspects of film students need to know is the types of film which are divided into two categories: film of record and feature film. A film of record is generally film thought to be factual. It usually begins with raw, unedited footage, called "actuality footage" such as the original home video of the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in 1991. A "news film" is actually footage that has been edited for the primary purpose of spreading information. When the King video was sent to the television station, it was edited to show only portions of the beating.

The next type of film of record is the "documentary." A documentary consists of portions of the actuality footage plus footage that has been shot

specifically for the film. An example might be a television special aired after the May 1992 Los Angeles riots which included interviews from people talking about the riots. The final type of film of record, the "compilation," is similar to the documentary but no new footage is shot. It just the pasting together of actuality footage to create a package of images.

Feature films consist of footage which has been staged for a specific purpose. Sometimes actuality footage is used to give a film a sense of reality. Oliver Stone's JFK is an example. Cartoons are included under this type of film.

In addition to knowing the types of film, students must also know some of the problems with using film as a historical document. The availability and preservation of films is a major problem. Students should be aware that the films they are seeing, especially from the early third of the 1900s, are only a fraction of the films that were actually made. The rest have been destroyed. The students should realize that certain attitudes they might be looking for may not be found in the available films.

Another problem is authenticity. Some film makers fake footage because it is easier and cheaper. For example, an upcoming movie about the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993 is filmed in Portland, Oregon where day-to-day expenses are cheaper instead of New York City which is generally more expensive.

Along with the problem of authenticity, students must also be aware of how the film makers try to influence the viewer. Besides the personal biases of the director and other personnel as mentioned earlier, other aspects influencing the viewer include the musical score or other sounds, technical aspects such as

lighting, and editing. Students do not necessarily need an in depth knowledge of the technical aspects since their focus is more on the interpretations of contemporary events. However, a general understanding of the technology is helpful because it can be used to understand various interpretations. An illustration of this is the D.W. Griffith film Way Down East (1920) where he uses backlighting to create a halo effect around the pure, good woman while the bad woman is displayed in a harsher frontlighting which indicated his preference of the Victorian ideal of purity and piousness.

To help the student analyze a film, the teacher should provide some study aids especially if the students have never analyzed a film before. A list of general questions might include

- What year was the film made?
- Who was the director?
- What population group(s) does the film focus on?
- What group(s) have been omitted?
- Who is the audience?
- Was the film a failure or a hit at the box office?

These questions should be discussed before viewing any films. Other study aids should include some specific questions that the students can ask as they view the film.

How should the teacher proceed with the study of the film? Using, for example, Prelude to War (1943) from the government documentary series Why We Fight, the teacher must first explain why the film is being made and who the audience is. In this case, the United States has entered World War II and it must relate through this film the causes of the war, plus the geography and cultures of the people that the soldiers will conquer. The film was first intended to indoctrinate an audience consisting mainly of soldiers, but it was eventually

released in the theaters. Some aspects of the film that the teacher might want to ask questions about include the portrayal of the enemies, the principles America is fighting for, and what groups are missing from the film.

Since most people including students are more familiar with using film as entertainment, teachers must be careful to put the films into the appropriate historical context and use them as teaching tools and not babysitters. Teaching students to analyze film as a historical document will be profitable to them in the future. As film historian David M. Considine expresses in his article "The Video Boom's Impact on Social Studies"

. . . films can be used both to motivate students and to explicate the past and the media's response to it. By comparing and contrasting information found in their textbooks, primary documents, and other sources with the films they view, students can be taught the creative viewing skills that are related to creative thinking skills.

Through the study of film as a historical document, students are actually doing historical research. Although this fact may not impress some students, it can turn the "boring" American history class into something exciting and new, plus teach the students analytical skills they can use in the future.

Sexuality and the Griffith Woman:
The Victorian Ideal in Way Down East (1920)

In late August 1920, a New York woman submitted this testimonial to the Kingston Daily Freeman after viewing D.W. Griffith's motion picture Way Down East.

To the Editor, Kingston Daily Freeman

My Dear Sir:- Because I know that I voice the true sentiment of so many who witnessed the marvelous presentation of "Way Down East," given at the Keeney Theatre Thursday evening, Mr. Griffith himself being present, may I ask you to voice this sincere tribute of "A Kingston Woman," in the columns of your paper?

. . . Mr. Griffith . . . has discovered and laid bare the man-soul that was born in every son who fought for mother, sister, sweetheart, wife, and home against the unspeakable German teaching that man's brute might can crush woman's inherent right.

As long as men and women shall see "Way Down East," given by those artists who have so deeply suffered in soul to present the artist-preacher's great sermon whose text is "One Standard of Right for Man and Woman." . . . so long shall there be more of purity, righteousness and inexpressible happiness in the world."¹

When D.W. Griffith, a failed actor and playwright, came to Biograph studios, an early film company, in 1907, he did not intend on making his living in the film industry because he did not think motion pictures were a lasting medium. Since he found many films morally outrageous, Griffith's films

concentrated on reforming society by teaching moral lessons. Within a few years, Griffith became a champion of the Victorian ideal in the film industry through such films as True Heart Susie (1919) and Way Down East (1920).²

Motion pictures began as another form of working-class entertainment such as the dance halls and the amusement parks. Designed to please this largely immigrant class, most of the early movies were comedy and political shorts and foreign films. Between 1908 and 1914, however movies and movie theaters began to also cater to middle-class clientele. No longer relegated to the status of working-class entertainment, the motion pictures reached a wider audience and thereby gained potential influence on a variety of issues.³ One issue often addressed by film makers, film critics, social commentators, and censors was the sexuality of women.

In the early twentieth century, many women experienced a period of upheaval which, for some, changed their definition of female sexuality. The popular interpretations of Sigmund Freud's theories implied that to be happy, women needed an unrepressed sex life instead of the passionless life of the Victorians. Some women also began to work outside the home establishing themselves in the labor force and the educational system. Also, a second generation of women became involved in the reform politics of Progressive Era. These changes often created new forms of female companionship and led some women to a new awareness of themselves and their potential social power.

However, these women continued to be confronted by their polar opposites, the Victorian idealists. The Victorianists perceived work, the movies, and the automobile as agents of moral decay affecting young middle and working-class women. As in past decades they continued to counteract this

erosion with images and examples of the Victorian model. Motherhood was one such image. Both pious and pure, a mother's duty was the moral upkeep of her home and family.⁴

When the Great War ended in November 1918, the struggle over a definition of women's sexuality continued. Reformers interested in developing new forms of sexual behavior developed what historian Christina Simmons has called "the myth of Victorian repression."

In her article "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression," Simmons asserts that "the myth . . . represented a cultural adjustment of male power to women's departure from the Victorian order."⁵ However, believing this new behavior to be a modification and not a departure from past male dominance, Simmons interprets this change as a response to two advances in women's power: sexual assertiveness and sexual restraint. Simmons continues by stating:

The myth of Victorian repression rehabilitated male sexuality and cast women as villains if they refuse to respond to , nurture, or support it, And by identifying women with Victorianism and men with a progressive and realistic understanding of sex, it confirmed men's sexual dominance as normative in modern marriage.⁶

The myth of Victorian repression manifests itself according to Simmons in the concept of the companionate marriage, a middle class answer to the expression of feminine sexuality. If women expressed their sexuality within their marriages, men would be sexually satisfied in their marriage bed instead of resorting to extra-marital relations for fulfillment. Thus, companionate marriages offered the best of the old and new concepts - women could be sexual yet men retained control of sexual relations.⁷

The social commentators of the 1920s defined a number of positive and negative images, both male and female, to dramatize the myth of Victorian repression. The negative images frequently targeted the Victorian ideal and excessive female power and included the prudish matriarch, the libido-driven male, and the celibate or lesbian career woman. More positive images were associated with the new sexual ideology. However, these youthful images of the flapper and the healthy male still warned women against extending their sexual power too far. Women should not dominate over men.⁸

What is the connection between the myth of Victorian repression and Way Down East? As previously mentioned, D.W. Griffith was the film industry's champion of the Victorian ideal. In a letter to William Brady dated July 23, 1920, Griffith states "I am free from producing any society underwear display in my productions and do not deal in any way, shape or form with the exhibition of the human body for revenue."⁹ Griffith's audiences appreciated his moralism. At the September 3, 1920 New York premiere of Way Down East, the audience cheered, whistled, and stamped their feet in appreciation.¹⁰ Eventhough a self-proclaimed Victorianist, Griffith contradicts the Victorian ideal in the film Way Down East. Although a supposed tribute to the Victorian ideal, the film instead demonstrates how unrealistic such an ideal is.¹¹ Unknown to Griffith of course, the movie is more accurately a portrayal of Simmons' myth of Victorian repression. All of the positive and negative images Simmons defines are represented by characters within the film.

The story of Way Down East begins in a New England village with Anna Moore (Lillian Gish) and her mother (Mrs. David Landau) discussing their

financial troubles. In order to obtain money, Anna goes to visit the Tremonts, the Moore's rich relatives in Boston. There she meets playboy Lennox Sanderson (Lowell Sherman) who convinces her to secretly marry him. Anna is unaware it is a mock marriage until she becomes pregnant and Sanderson tells her the truth before abandoning her.

After her mother's death, Anna goes to live in a boarding house in the town of Beldon where she gives birth to a child. However, the baby soon dies and the landlady, Mrs. Maria Poole (Emily Fitzroy), forces Anna to leave because she is not married. After wandering the countryside, Anna eventually finds employment at the farm of Squire Bartlett (Burr McIntosh). To her dismay, she finds that their neighbor is Sanderson who tries to force her to leave. However, Squire Bartlett's son David (Richard Bartholomew) has fallen in love with Anna despite her efforts to discourage him.

Eventually, the Bartletts uncover Anna's unwed pregnancy and Squire Bartlett expels her from his home. Before leaving, she confesses her whole past, thereby exposing Sanderson. David attacks Sanderson as Anna runs from the house into a fearsome blizzard. Reaching a river, Anna faints on an ice cake which is being carried downstream toward a waterfall. Before she reaches the falls, David rescues her. The film ends with their marriage.

In Simmon's article, one theme she examines is the change in male sexuality during the twentieth century. Although not dealing directly with female sexuality, these changes did effect the sex life of women. Reformers called for a new healthy man who was responsive to women's sexual needs but not fearful of his natural sexual drive. They said this type of man made the best husband. The libido-driven male directly contrasts the new healthy one. In the

new sexual ideology, this man was not acceptable because he did not concern himself with the sexual needs of women.¹²

Two characters in the film exemplify these images. The healthy male is David Bartlett while the libido-driven male is Lennox Sanderson. Sanderson uses women solely for his pleasure and leaves them once they no longer hold his interest. Although, the sexual side of David is never seen in the film, scenes of his sensitivity towards animals, his declaration of love to Anna, and his manly rescue of her in the blizzard, lead the viewer to believe that David typifies the ideal husband.

Another theme of the new sexual ideology derives from the images of female dominance over male sexuality. Purposefully, none of these images are positive because they serve as a warning to women not to exercise complete control over sexual relations.¹³

The first of these images is the prudish matriarch. The matriarch was accused of withholding male sexual rights from her husband due to her aversion to sex especially out of wedlock.¹⁴ In the film, Mrs. Maria Poole, the landlady in Beldon, is the primary example of the Victorian matriarch. Once she finds out that Anna's child was conceived outside of marriage, Mrs. Poole evicts Anna even though the child has already died.

Another negative image is the celibate or lesbian career woman who controls male sexuality by shunning it. She is either too involved in her career, which makes her unappealing to men, or she finds her sexual fulfillment through female companionship.¹⁵ In the film, the "eccentric aunt" Anna meets in Boston suggests this image. The viewer knows little about the aunt except that she has been defeminized. In her first appearance, she is wearing masculine clothing

and is portrayed as being an outcast from society.

The final theme concerns the new female sexual identity.¹⁶ A significant portion of the film's imagery addresses this new identity, and Anna is the female character in Way Down East who best exemplifies it.

Growing up under the guidance of her mother, Anna learns the proper role for women. However, from the beginning Anna is different from the Victorian ideal. She goes to Boston unaccompanied by a chaperone. Once there she acts innocent and naive but enjoys meeting men, demonstrated by the number of times she returns to shake Sanderson's hand after falling for his charms.

Generally, she dresses modestly. In comparison to her cousins, her strapless evening gown is modest. She even holds a fan in front of her chest the whole evening. In these images, Anna does not present the image of a sexual being, but on the night of her honeymoon, Sanderson gives her a lacy negligee which she models for him. Although she had not experimented sexually before her marriage, she had idealized the joys of sex and intimacy since her youth. As the screen title reads "To her it is the fulfillment of the dreams of girlhood."

Another aspect of the new female identity exemplified by Anna occurs prior to her expulsion from the Bartlett home. Anna exposes Sanderson, who is courting a cousin of the Bartlett family, as the man who impregnated her, thus ruining his chances of winning the cousin's hand. This is a bold attack on the old double standard that allowed sexual freedom for males but condemned it for females. After David rescues her from the falls, though, she heeds the warning of the social commentators of the 1920s and allows David to be the dominate force in their relationship.

In her article, Simmons states several times that the new feminine sexuality of the 1920s had only a slightly expanded parameter of the older views of sexuality.¹⁷ A woman could be sexual but preferably within marriage and without trying to control male sexuality. To view Way Down East as an example of Griffith's glorification of the Victorian ideal is not entirely wrong. For the middle class, the new sexuality was a more watered-down version of the Victorian ideal instead path breaking new sexual mores. The final shot of Way Down East shows Mrs. Bartlett kissing Anna after David and Anna's marriage. In essence she has christened the new female sexuality, passing the old to the new.

Endnotes

1. D.W. Griffith Papers (DWG), Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), newspaper clipping, Kingston, New York, August 1920.
2. For reviews of D.W. Griffith and Biograph see Robert M. Henderson's D.W. Griffith: The Years at Biograph and Richard Schickel's D.W. Griffith.
3. Lary May, Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3-21, 147-166.
4. In Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988, 177-78), John D'Emillio and Estelle Freedman have found Victorian women could enjoy sex if it was a part of marriage.
5. Christina Simmons, "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression," in Passion and Power: Sexuality in History, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons with Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 158.
6. Ibid., 158.
7. Ibid., 162.
8. Ibid., 162-68.
9. DWG, MOMA, letter to William Brady, July 23, 1920.
10. Richard Schickel, D.W. Griffith: An American Life (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 440.
11. Leslie Fishbein ("The Demise of the Cult of True Womanhood in Early American Film. 1900-1930," Journal of Popular Film and Television) and Sumiko Higashi (Virgins, Vamps, and Flappers: The American Silent Movie Heroine, Montreal: Eden Press, 1978) both discuss the implausibility of the Victorian ideal in Way Down East.
12. Simmons, "Modern Sexuality," 162-64.
13. Ibid., 164.
14. Ibid., 164-65.
15. Ibid., 166-67.
16. Ibid., 170.
17. Ibid., 170-72.

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